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ABSTRACT

It is hypothesized that the learning afforded by two kinds of educational experiences, standard coursework and volunteer fieldwork, can be enhanced considerably through their integration into a psychology fieldwork course which includes certain additional features designed to facilitate the synergistic process. These features include individualized reading, analytical writing, and multidimensional evaluation. The year-long course is open to approximately 15 superior senior psychology majors, and includes weekly classes, six hours of fieldwork, and progress reports which summarize experiences and critique individualized readings. Within this conceptual perspective, the fieldwork is seen as a catalyst in augmenting the intellectual challenges and academic benefits associated with other course activities, advancing further the student's knowledge and academic skills of inquiry, analysis, and communication. (Author/LS)

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ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE AND ACADEMIC SKILLS WITH FIELDWORK AS THE CATALYST

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ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE AND ACADEMIC SKILLS WITH FIELDWORK AS THE CATALYST

It is the "experiential" component of psychology fieldwork courses that is often responsible for attracting the enthusiastic interest of students and offending the scholarly values of educators. Such courses are viewed by some as social diversions which afford academic credit with little intellectual effort or benefit. Others view them as honorably motivated but differ in their expectations as to whether academic goals will be appreciably served by fieldwork observation and participation. It is the contention of this paper that a psychology fieldwork course can promote a synergistic relationship between academic and experiential components to advance the student's knowledge and academic skills of inquiry, analysis, and communication, in a manner which is satisfactory to students and educators alike.

Conceptual Framework

Within this conceptual perspective, the fieldwork experience is seen as a catalyst in augmenting the intellectual challenges and academic benefits associated with other course activities. With certain features, such a course can advance the student beyond the gains normally derived from separate, uncoordinated participation in academic and experiential functions.

While something certainly will be learned from standard coursework and from volunteer fieldwork experienced independently, there may be certain limitations. For example, how many students would still be able to pass the final exam in their abnormal psychology course if the exam were presented to them a year later? And to what extent would the retained knowledge coincide with their actual needs if they subsequently found themselves confronted

with the real-life challenges of working in a clinical facility. Conversely, how much benefit would the student volunteer derive from spending several hours per week at a clinical facility with little academic preparation, minimal supervision, and hours that vary with the academic, job, and social demands that are given priority over the student's volunteer commitment?

It is my hypothesis that the learning afforded by these two kinds of experiences, standard coursework and volunteer fieldwork, can be enhanced considerably through their integration into a psychology fieldwork course which includes certain additional features designed to facilitate the synergistic process. These features include individualized reading, analytical writing, and multidimensional evaluation, as represented in a fieldwork course introduced eight years ago at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

The Course

The course was designed to provide superior psychology students with an opportunity to broaden their undergraduate training through academic coursework supplemented by supervised field experience in settings providing psychological services. The course begins each Fall Quarter and runs through the academic year, accommodating about fifteen senior psychology majors who are selected on the basis of overall academic performance and past performance in psychology.

In accordance with their preferences, three or four students are assigned to each of four available facilities for the year. These facilities vary in their client populations (e.g., psychotic adults; emotionally-disturbed adolescents; mentally retarded children; etc.), structures (e.g., residential; day

treatment; outpatient; etc.), and intervention approaches (e.g., behavioral; psychodynamic; group or individually-administered; etc.). Students spend approximately six hours per week at the psychological setting, at least one hour of which consists of a group supervision session conducted by a qualified staff member of the facility. Students also attend weekly class meetings with the course instructor, during which time fieldwork experiences are shared and discussed, readings are reviewed, special guest speakers are occasionally invited, and various psychological issues are considered.

Weekly progress reports, which are submitted to the instructor two days prior to each class session so that they can be evaluated and returned in class, are an important academic feature of the course. The progress report consists of two sections. The Fieldwork Experience section begins with a summary of the salient features of the student's fieldwork for the preceding week, and this is followed by the student's evaluative thoughts about the fieldwork experience. The Reading Critique section begins with a listing and summary of the individualized readings completed during the preceding week, and this is followed by a critical analysis and evaluation of the reading material and its relationship to the student's fieldwork. The progress reports are designed to encourage students to think critically and creatively about their readings and fieldwork; the reports also enable the instructor to stay in close touch with the experiences of each student, as well as to identify issues that are likely to be of interest for general class discussion.

Grades in the course are based primarily upon students' weekly progress reports, individual meetings with the instructor, quarterly evaluations of fieldwork performance provided by students' supervisors, and quality of participation in class sessions.

A summary of some basic objectives of the course, as formulated by the instructor and distributed to prospective students at the outset, is presented in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Special Features

There are three special features of the course which I believe serve an important function in facilitating the synergistic relationship between the academic and experiential components:

Individualized reading. The challenges of the fieldwork motivate the student to search for relevant literature resources to fill personal gaps in knowledge and to facilitate effective fieldwork participation, which often includes the formulation and execution of a small-scale research project. It is expected that the student who is prompted to review the current literature on, for example, paranoid schizophrenia as a result of encountering patients with that diagnosis will learn and retain more about the nature and insufficiency of our knowledge than the student whose exposure is limited to either reading alone or encountering alone.

Analytical writing. Preparation of a weekly progress report requires the student to think actively and creatively about the readings and fieldwork, and to gain useful experience in analytical writing. It is expected that the student who is compelled to formulate his or her thoughts and impressions in writing will achieve a greater depth of understanding than the student whose involvement in readings or fieldwork is more passive and transitory.

Multidimensional evaluation. Awareness that, through progress reports, individual meetings with the instructor, appraisals by fieldwork supervisors, and class participation, virtually all features of their performance are being closely monitored, with constructive feedback provided, assures high standards of student academic effort. It is expected that the student whose work is being evaluated within the context of a formal course providing unit credits and a letter grade will be more motivated and reliable in fulfilling the academic and fieldwork responsibilities than, for example, a student whose commitment to fieldwork participation is entirely voluntary.

Concluding Remarks

In addition to the experiential learning associated with the fieldwork itself, this course structure is designed to advance each student's knowledge and academic skills of inquiry, analysis, and communication. Students' course evaluations (see Table 2), written reports, and subsequent achievements suggest

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Insert Table 2 about here

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that the course has been very effective in virtually all respects. The only consistent complaint that I have received from staff at the fieldwork facilities concerns the vacuum left by the departure of our students at the end of the academic year; in several instances, the staff had become so dependent on the contributions of particular students that offers of employment were extended to individuals upon graduation. The only consistent student complaint, which does not appear to have discouraged others from seeking enrollment, is that the course requires so much time that more unit credits should be given.

Within this context, it probably should be noted that the course also requires a substantial time commitment from the instructor. Responsibilities include selecting and formulating fieldwork arrangements with psychological-service facilities, organizing student fieldwork assignments and staff supervisory sessions, advising on and monitoring individual readings and fieldwork activities, reviewing and providing written feedback on each student's weekly progress report, meeting with students on an individual basis in addition to weekly sessions with the entire class, helping students deal with the occasional crisis situations which inevitably arise, systematically evaluating student performances along multiple dimensions, and regularly reappraising the suitability of psychological facilities for continuation of fieldwork arrangements in conjunction with the course. While more instructor time is required than for the standard lecture course, contributing to and observing the academic progress of the students can make the experience very rewarding for the instructor as well.

In concluding, it must be emphasized that this conceptual analysis of the factors responsible for the apparent success of the course is largely speculative. Within my perspective, the fieldwork experience appears to serve as a catalyst in augmenting the intellectual challenges and academic benefits associated with other course activities. The synergistic effect of the academic and experiential components appears to emerge from their integration in the psychology fieldwork course together with the special features noted above. In certain respects this resembles the approach often taken in psychology research courses where academic and laboratory components are coordinated to provide students with a comprehensive experience in learning about the methods and substance of psychological research.

The purported educational desirability of merging the academic with the experiential is not a novel proposition. In his classic work entitled Walden, published in 1854, Henry David Thoreau included the following passage within a discussion of educational philosophy:

> "Which would have advanced the most at the end of a month,—the boy who had made his own jackknife from the ore which he had dug and smelted, reading as much as would be necessary for this,—or the boy who had attended the lectures on metallurgy at the Institute in the mean while, and had received a Rogers' penknife from his father? Which would be most likely to cut his fingers?"

The basic view expressed here so succinctly by Thoreau, and throughout this paper, is that educational progress in certain domains will be enhanced by integrating real-life experience with academic instruction. It is a reasonable hypothesis worthy of continued exploration.

Table 1

Basic Course Objectives

Basic objectives include helping the student to:

(1) Develop a broader and deeper understanding of the theories and methods of psychological intervention employed in real-life settings.

(2) Become familiar with the specialized literature on psychopathology and its treatment related to the type of facility and population of the assigned fieldwork setting.

(3) Become partly desensitized to the stresses and challenges of establishing a personal identity in a "helper" role at a psychological-service facility, as well as to the frustration of discovering that well-intended personal efforts are not always successful or appreciated.

(4) Gain a more realistic perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of existing psychological facilities, their staffs, and the methods they employ.

(5) Learn about the structure and functions of other psychological facilities through visits, presentations by professional staff, and discussions by students working at other facilities.

(6) Improve and refine academic skills of inquiry, analysis, and communication.

(7) Conduct small-scale research projects with an individual or group if such an activity is within the student's interest, and is feasible at the assigned facility.

Table 2

Student Course Evaluations--Representative Items, Fall 1977

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(1) This course helped me learn different methods of inquiry and expression.

71% - more than most other courses
29% - about as much as most other courses
0% - less than most other courses

(2) This course helped me develop specific skills, competencies, and points of view needed by professionals in this discipline.

94% - more than most other courses
6% - about as much as most other courses
0% - less than most other courses

(3) This course helped me improve my ability to think, to solve problems, and to make decisions.

67% - more than most other courses
27% - about as much as most other courses
7% - less than most other courses

(4) This course helped me develop a sense of personal responsibility (self-reliance, self-discipline).

86% - more than most other courses
14% - about as much as most other courses
0% - less than most other courses

(5) I worked harder in this course than in most courses I have taken.

87% - agree 13% - disagree

(6) In rating or evaluating a course, you can consider course material itself OR what the instructor does with the material. PLEASE GRADE ONLY THE COURSE MATERIAL.

100% - A 0% - B 0% - C 0% - D 0% - F

(7) In rating or evaluating a course, you can consider course material itself OR what the instructor does with the material. PLEASE GRADE ONLY THE INSTRUCTOR'S TEACHING.

93% - A 7% - B 0% - C 0% - D 0% - F

(continued)

Table 2, continued

(8) Assume this course is not required. Knowing what the course covers, if you had not already taken it, you would

100% - definitely want to take it.
0% - probably want to take it.
0% - be undecided about taking it.
0% - probably not want to take it.
0% - definitely not want to take it.

(9) How would you rate this course compared to other courses you have taken at this university?

100% - better than most
0% -
0% - same as most
0% -
0% - worse than most

(10) The overall quality of the course was

88% - excellent
6% -
6% - satisfactory
0% -
0% - poor